

Unit 9: Religious History--Georgia

Objectives

At the end of this section, you will

Be aware of the following

- Nature of Georgian folk religious practice
- Impact of the Orthodox Church on Georgian language and culture
- Negative impact of Russian oversight on Georgian Orthodox religion
- 08 April 1989 demonstration and suppression of participants by government forces
- Abkhazian and Ajarian folk religious practice
- Current government pressures on non-Georgian Orthodox religious groups

Identify

- Apostles, St. Nino, grapevine cross
- Autocephalous, Catholics, Patriarch
- Metropolitan, John Chrysostom,
- King David the Builder
- Patriarch Illia II
- Abkhazian, Ajarian

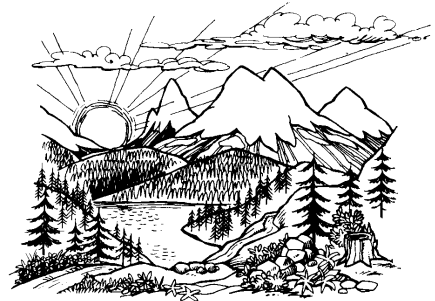
Realize

- Symbolism surrounding the grapevine cross for Georgian Orthodox faithful
- Fusion of folk and Orthodox religious practice for some Georgian people
- Religious persuasion of Abkhazian and Ajarian ethnic groups
- Long history of positive orthodox and Jewish interaction in Georgia
- Tradition of religious tolerance in Georgia
- Difficulties for non-Georgian Orthodox religious groups to receive properties taken during the Soviet area

Unit 9: Religious History--Georgia

I. Early Religious History--Georgian Orthodox Church

1. Folk Religion Indigenous religions within Georgia prior to the introduction of Christianity included Greek mythology, Zoroastrian practice and rites associated with the earth. Groves, trees and mountains became sacred sites. Animal sacrifice was commonplace.



Death became associated with the west, caves and travel through water. The afterlife was a shadowy, dim replica of this one. A banquet table, surrounded by mute, non-eating souls, existed. These souls may continue to maintain family loyalties. Food, drink and clothing/entertainment may still be set aside by family members for their departed loved ones. Well-being in the afterlife depends on character in this world, plus the continued care of living relatives.

2. Early Christianity

a. Tradition According to church tradition, after Christ's resurrection, the apostles (early followers of Christ) and Virgin Mary gathered to determine where they should go to proclaim the gospel. Through drawing of lots, the Holy Virgin drew Georgia. Responding to a voice from heaven, however, Mary sent the apostles Andrew and Simon the Canaanite to the region.

b. St. Nino

(1) Early evangelization efforts The conversion of many Georgians occurred in A.D. 330, placing them among the first peoples to accept Christianity.

"According to tradition, a holy slave woman, who became known as Saint Nino, cured Queen Nana of Iberia of an unknown illness, and King Marian III accepted Christianity when a second miracle occurred during a royal hunting trip" (Library of Congress Country Study--Georgia).

(2) Grapevine cross Another part of the tradition has St. Nino receiving a grapevine cross from the Virgin Mary. Nino took the cross when she came on her mission to Georgia. This grapevine cross, a symbol of the Georgia Orthodox Church, is preserved in the Sioni Cathedral of Tbilisi (tah-bi-LEE-see).

St. Nino's travels--from Cappadocia (ka-pah-DOH-shah, a Roman province in the current mountainous region of central modern Turkey) to Mtskheta (ahmt-SKYE-tah, a historical Georgian town some 5 miles north northwest of Tbilisi)--are a source of great inspiration for Orthodox faithful.



c. Autocephalous (self-governing) status King Marian requested emperor Constantine to send a bishop and priest to the new converts. The founding and building of Christian churches flourished. In the 400s, under King Vakhtang Gorgasali, the church became self-governing.

The first bishop was called a Catholicos-Archbishop, catholicos being an honorary title of a leader ranking below a patriarch (Orthodox leader over a national church) but above a metropolitan (Orthodox leader in the primary city of the national church).

d. Early pilgrimage sites The remains of St. Maxim the Confessor (d. 662), an early theologian, are in the village of Lechkhumi in the mountainous region of western Georgia. John Chrysostom (KRIS-ahs-tahm, @347-407), the "golden mouthed" hermit-monk and famous preacher, after being sent into exile in Transcaucasia, died in Kamani, some 3 miles from Sukhumi (SAH-chah-

mee) on the Black Sea coast. Though his remains were moved to Constantinople, the shrine which used to contain his bones is in the cathedral of Sukhumi.

II. Middle Ages

1. Culture Impact The development of Georgia's written language stems, in large part, to the work of early church leaders. In the 400s, a priest in the royal court, Yakov Tsurtaveli, wrote a book entitled The Martyrdom of Saint Shushanika, considered by many as a masterpiece of early Georgian literature.

Jewelry, icon painting and hymn writing also came from early church sources. Monks from the church settled in Jerusalem and founded the monastery of Ivezon on Greece's Mt. Athos.

2. Arab Invasions The church served as a unifying force for the nation in the face of Arab invasions. King David the Builder (r. 1099-1125), after repelling the Seljuk Turks, effectively ended 300 years of Muslim domination surrounding Tbilisi. He proclaimed religious toleration, inviting a variety of ethnic peoples to live in underpopulated regions of Georgia.

3. Patriarchy Established In the early 1000s, Melkhisedek I was awarded the title of Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia.



4. Orthodox/Folk Religion Fusion For some Georgian peoples, over time Christian and folk religious survival fused together. An all-encompassing folk god, with many lesser deities (angels, saints, icons) acquired Christian meanings. Saint George the dragon slayer and protector of humankind was widely esteemed. Tamar the Queen became associated with the sun; St. Barbara with fertility and healing; Kopala was a victor over a race with demons.



Churches were built on mountains or near sacred trees and groves. Shrines for the deceased faithful became associated with heavenly invisible chains along which saints travel in the form of birds, a winged cross or light. For some of the commonfolk, religion became an amalgamation of indigenous practice along with Christian, Muslim and humanist beliefs.

5. Constantinople Fall When Turkish Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II captured Constantinople in 1453, Georgian Christianity lost a healthy ally. Turks, Persians and Russian Tzars fought over lands in the Georgian region. In western Georgia, slave trading and warfare reduced and impoverished all classes of society.

III. Russian Annexation

1. Loss of Self-Governing Status With the annexation of Georgia by Russia in 1801 and the 1811 edict which terminated the autonomy of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Russia became active in domination of religious affairs.

Church leadership became subordinate to Russian Orthodox leadership in Moscow. The church, in part, became an instrument of government Russification policies.

A restoration of autocephalous status occurred after the 1917 revolution, yet by 1924, Stalin's hand was felt in the region.

2. Soviet Rule

a. Early repression Severe persecutions occurred in the 1920s to late 1930s. Bitter antireligious campaigns were waged against Christian and Muslim thought and practice. Religious indifferentism, rather than wholesale atheism, became the norm. Various underground Christian activities kept the faith alive.

b. Church destruction "Soviet rule brought severe purges of the Georgian church hierarchy and constant repression of Orthodox worship.

As elsewhere in the Soviet Union, many churches were destroyed or converted into secular buildings. This history of repression encouraged the incorporation of religious identity into the strong nationalist movement in twentieth-century Georgia and the quest of Georgians for religious expression outside the official, government controlled church.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, opposition leaders, especially Zviad Gamsakhurdia, criticized corruption in the church hierarchy" (Library of Congress Country Study--Georgia).



c. Patriarch Ilia II "When Ilia II became the patriarch (catholicos) of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the late 1970s, he brought order and a new morality to church affairs, and Georgian Orthodoxy experienced a revival. In 1988 Moscow permitted the patriarch to begin consecrating and reopening closed churches, and a large-scale restoration process began."

IV. Post-Soviet Realities

1. April Tragedy Patriarch Illia II took a visible leadership role in the events immediately after the 8 April 1989 butchery of demonstrators advocating sovereignty and an opening of oppressive tensions. Government armed forces used entrenching tools to disperse the crowd. Though the Patriarch escaped injury, some 19 people were dead with hundreds wounded. Patriarch Illia II conducted commemorative services for those deceased.

2. Ethnic Conflict Abkhazian (ab-KAY-zhee-ahn)

strife in northwest Georgia necessitates Russian peacekeepers currently in the area. Georgian Orthodox church leaders in the region continue to appeal for tolerance and compassion not only amongst the Abkhazians and Georgians, but also Armenians, Greeks, Russians, Ukrainians and Jewish peoples living in the area.

3. Religious Resurgence

In 1989 a new translation of the Bible into modern Georgia literary language was completed. Two large open air baptismal ceremonies occurred within and near Tbilisi in the same year, each attracting thousands of faithful.

V. Other Faith Groups



1. Non-Orthodox Religions--Overview

"Religious groups other than Orthodox traditionally have received tolerant treatment in Georgia. Jewish communities exist throughout the country, with major concentrations in the two largest cities, Tbilisi (Mtskheta) and Kutaisi (koo-tah-EE-see, 50 miles inland from the Black Sea in Central Georgia). Azerbaijani groups have practiced Islam in Georgia for centuries, as have the Abkhazian and Ajarian groups concentrated in their respective autonomous republics. The Armenian Apostolic Church, whose doctrine differs in some ways from that of Georgian Orthodoxy, has autocephalous status (Library of Congress Country Studies--Georgia).

2. Abkhazians

a. Overview Roughly half of the Abkhazian population are Orthodox Christians and half are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi rite. For Muslims, not eating pork is an important practice.

b. Indigenous blend Abkhazian peoples practice many folk religious ways.

Though varying within regions, the concept of God is that he is one yet composed of infinite parts. Local spirits include "Afe," the spirit of thunder and weather; "Shasta," who protects blacksmiths and artisans; "Azhveipshaa," the spirit of forests, wild animals and hunting; and "Aitar," the protector of domesticated animals.



c. Observances Sacred trees, groves and mountains become centers for religious gatherings, being tied to the strength of male descendants and God above. Distinctive breads and cheeses, cut and distributed on certain occasions, accentuate a motherly trait of worship and religious practice. At times, animal sacrifices are offered for ill family members or to induce rain. Stones with naturally worn holes in them ward off the evil eye.

3. Ajarians

a. Islamization The Ajarian (ah-JAHR-ee-ahn) peoples of the southwest Georgia coast became Muslims through a long and arduous process. Historically, much of Muslim belief came not from voluntary means. Many from an original Orthodox Christian population died in the struggle. Others emigrated to Christian provinces in Georgia. The rest became oppressed victims of feudal lords or Turkish overseers.

b. Christian/Muslim blend Remnants of Christian practice remain, even with Islamic factions. Crosses decorate maize-meal cakes. A cross with a grapevine wound around it provides ornamentation for mosques. Christian graves are carefully tended. Ruins of monasteries and churches are preserved for their enduring Christian symbolism.

c. Historical themes By the end of the 1800s, there were still Ajarians who practiced a secret Christian faith and ritual. In the 1930s-40s, a Communist bitter antireligious campaign focused on Islam in Ajaria. Mosques closed. Clergy leaders were suppressed. Indifferentism, rather than atheism of the locals, was the result. According to the Encyclopedia of World Cultures, Vol. IV, Europe, in the early 1990s, a voluntary reconversion to Christianity, especially among the young, began taking place in Ajaria.

4. Georgian Jews

a. History

(1) Early accounts

According to oral traditions and ancient literary account, Jewish peoples entered Georgia over 2,500 years ago.



At the time of the Assyrian and Babylonian (586 B.C.) conquerors in Palestine, exiled Jews came to Georgia. Many settled in the area near Mtskheta. After the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70, large groups came to the area.

(2) Schools Over time, schools of Jewish scribes, translators and theologians became widely known. Mtskheta became the respected center of Georgian Judaism. According to legend, the Shroud of Elijah and tunic of Jesus were buried here, having been brought from Jerusalem by Mtskhetsk Jews.

(3) Jerusalem and Christian ties Georgian Jewish scholars actively corresponded and debated with Jerusalem counterparts.

Some see the rise of the first Christian community in Iberia (Georgia) in the first century developing from Mtskheta Jewish practitioners. Apparently, the first Christian church was a synagogue upon which the Jewish rabbi Abiatar allowed St. Nino to place a cross.



b. Culture integration Though preserving a distinct Jewish character, Georgian Jewish peoples historically--scholars, artists, writers, doctors, sportspeople, government, military and public life officials--have been active in Georgian civic life. Little or no ethnic/religious persecution occurred.

5. Freedom of Religion (The following material, taken from the State Department Report on Human Rights and Practices--Georgia, 1997, gives an account of the current status of church/state issues in Georgia.

a. Overview "The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government respects this right in practice. Georgia has a tradition of religious tolerance."

b. Nontraditional religions "However, the Georgian Orthodox Church lobbied Parliament and the Government for laws that would grant it special status and restrict the activities of missionaries from 'nontraditional' religions. In May the Ministry of Justice presented a draft of a law on religious organizations to Parliament which would have identified 'traditional' religions eligible for government assistance and support but would have required other religious organizations to wait 25 years to achieve such status.

However, the bill encountered opposition, was returned to the Ministry to be rewritten, and no further action has been taken."

c. Return of Churches "The Catholic Church and the Armenian Orthodox Church have been unable to secure the return of churches closed during the Soviet period and later given to the Georgian Orthodox Church. A prominent Armenian Church in Tbilisi remains closed, and both Churches, as is the case with Protestant denominations, have been unable to get permission to construct new churches, reportedly as a result of pressure from the Georgian Orthodox Church."



d. Treatment of religious minorities "The Government generally respects the rights of religious minorities."

(1) Evangelicals "However, the Georgian Orthodox Church sought special status from the Government and tried to hinder evangelical missionaries and the Salvation Army. Foreign Christian missionaries, particularly evangelicals, continued to report incidents of harassment on the part of Orthodox priests and their supporters. A March worship meeting of the Salvation Army in Rustavi was disrupted by a crowd led by 10 Orthodox priests."

The Patriarchy publicly denounced the Salvation Army, calling it a satanic organization. The Georgian Orthodox Church has argued that foreign Christian missionaries should confine their activities to non-Christian areas."

(2) Jewish groups "Organizations promoting the rights of Jews and Jewish emigration continue to report that the Government provides good cooperation and support."

Jewish leaders attribute isolated acts of anti-Semitism in previous years, including the publication of anti-Semitic newspaper articles and the destruction

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of Jewish communal property, to general instability and disorder. The Government has been outspoken in denouncing anti-Semitism. The editor of the independent newspaper Noi received a 3-year prison sentence and publication of the newspaper was suspended following publication of a virulently anti-Semitic article in 1996."

(3) Jewish buildings "The Jewish community publishes and distributes a newspaper without any problems. However, the Jewish community also experienced delay in the return of property confiscated during Soviet rule. A former synagogue, rented from the Government by a theater group, was ordered by the courts to be returned to the Jewish community in April. The theater group refused to comply and started a publicity campaign with anti-Semitic overtones to justify its continued occupation of the building. In August the mayor of Tbilisi gave the campaign implicit support by reversing a previous city government decision that also called for the return of the building, but at year's end there had been no resolution of the issue."



"Discard worry."

Vocabulary List: Religious History--Georgia

Abkhazian (ab-KAY-zhee-ahn) Ethnic group located in northwest Georgia. Strife in their region necessitates Russian peacekeepers to monitor a cease-fire.

Ajarian (ah-JAHR-ee-ahn) Peoples in southwest Georgia who possess a Muslim faith with Christian overtones.

Apostles Early followers of Jesus Christ

Autocephalous Self-governing nature of church government for many Orthodox churches.

Catholicos Honorary title of some Orthodox church leaders, ranking them below a patriarch but above a metropolitan.

Chrysostom, John (KRIS-ahs-tahm, @347-407) "Golden mouthed" hermit-monk and famous preacher who was exiled in Georgia, dying near the Black Sea.

David, King--the Builder (r. 1099-1125) Georgian king who effectively ended 300 years of Muslim rule in Georgia.

Grapevine cross Tradition has it that St. Nino received a grapevine cross from Mary, the mother of Christ. St. Nino used it in her travels to Georgia. This cross is now a symbol of Georgian Christianity.

Ilia II, Patriarch Current head of the Georgian Orthodox Church

Metropolitan Orthodox church leader in the primary city of a national church.

Nino, St. According to tradition, this holy slave woman cured leaders of historic Georgia of illness. She was instrumental in bringing Christianity to Georgia in the early 300s (A.D.)

Patriarch Supreme Orthodox church leader in a given country.

Review Quiz: Religious History--Georgia



Fill in the Blanks Fill in the blanks with the most correct word immediately following this text. Not all words listed will be used.

According to tradition, a holy slave woman, (1)_____, was instrumental in converting Georgian people to Christianity in A.D. 330. A symbol of the Georgian Orthodox church, tracing back to this time is the (2)_____.

A "golden tongued" hermit-monk and famous preacher (347-407) who died in Georgia was (3)_____. King David the (4)_____ (1099-1125) stood up to the Seljuk Turks, effectively ending 300 years of Muslim domination in the region.

Under early Soviet rule in Georgia, religious (5)_____ became the norm.

Russian peacekeepers are currently in northwest Georgia due to (6)_____ strife. In southwest Georgia, Ajarian people live, being primarily (7)_____ in religion.

For many Georgian Jewish people, there is a long tradition of religious (8)_____ in the region.

In the Georgian parliament, the Georgian Orthodox Church recently introduced legislation to (9)_____ activities from missionaries of non-traditional religions.

An issue for both Catholic, Armenian, and Jewish groups in Georgia is the return of (10)_____ confiscated during Soviet rule.

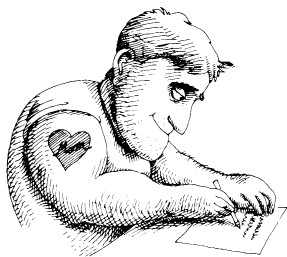
Abkhazian	encourage	prayer books
Armenian	grapevine cross	redneck
atheism	indifferentism	restrict
Billy Graham	John Chrysostom	righteous
Builder	Muslim	St. Nino
buildings	Orthodox	tolerance
Cross of St. Andrew	persecution	



"For 31 years, I have felt privileged to be a sailor and to be counted as one they trusted. Through boot camp and flight training, to Hanoi and Cuba, to the IO and the Gulf, on 6 carriers, 11 deployments, and 5 times in command...always surrounded by, held up by, and defined by...Sailors. I shall never forget them and all they stand for. America is more blessed than she can know for who they are and what they do...To all who sail on, know that you do God's work. If you listen carefully in the direction of the shore, the cheering you hear from there will be mine, and it will go on all of my days."

Retirement words, Vice Admiral Lyle Bien,

U.S. Navy, 2 Dec 1998



Resources for Further Study: Religious History--Georgia

Friedrich, Paul and Norma Diamond. Encyclopedia of World Cultures, Vol. VI, Russia and Eurasia/China. New York: G.K. Hall, 1994. (Articles on Ajarians, [pp. 12-14], Abkhazians, [pp. 5-9], Georgians, [pp. 129-137], Georgian Jews, [pp. 126-128]).

Goetz, Philip ed. New Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. 5. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990. (P. 203, Georgian Orthodox Church).

Kaiser, Phillip ed. Country Profile of the Republic of Georgia. McLean, Virginia: Science Applications International Corporation, 1997.

Library of Congress Country Study--Georgia, 1995.
<[www://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cshome.html](http://www.loc.gov/frd/cs/cshome.html)>

U.S. Department of State, Georgia Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998. Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 30 January, 1999.
<http://www.state.gov/www/global/hu...ights/1998_report/>